

Leading system transformation: A work in progress

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Abstract

Internationally, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted the education sector. While NSW has avoided the longer periods of remote learning that our colleagues in Victoria and other countries have experienced, we have nonetheless been provoked to reflect on the nature of schooling and the systemic support we provide to transform the learning of each student and enrich the professional lives of staff within our Catholic learning community. At Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta (CEDP), a key pillar of our approach is to create conditions that enable everyone to be a leader. Following the initial lockdown period in 2020 when students learned remotely, we undertook an informal teacher voice piece with the purpose of engaging teachers and leaders from across our 80 schools in Greater Western Sydney to reflect on and capture key learnings. This project revealed teachers and leaders reported very high feelings of self-efficacy, motivation and confidence in their capacity to learn and lead in the volatile pandemic landscape. These findings raised the question: how do we enable this self-efficacy, motivation and confidence in an ongoing way? This paper documents the systematic reflection process undertaken by CEDP to understand the enabling conditions a system can provide to activate everyone to be a leader in the post-pandemic future and the key learnings emerging from this process.

Introduction

The call for educational transformation is echoing throughout the world as we approach our post-pandemic future. In Australia, reviews of curriculum offerings are underway at both state and national levels as well as an examination of the pathways through education and how the outcomes of these diverse pathways are documented in a meaningful way. While CEDP has felt the fierce urgency of this call well before the pandemic, the rapid change that occurred throughout 2020 has accelerated this work. Societal change in this past year has been undeniable and further changes to the economy and employment patterns will emerge. The nature of teachers' work changed dramatically when lessons moved online last year and this opened possibilities for collaboration that had not previously been explored. Prior to the pandemic there were already concerns about teacher workloads and this has been further explored in recent papers (Gallop, 2021). As the staffing concerns that have cast an ominous shadow in our schools in recent years are coming to an outright crisis, we need to consider new ways of working and reflect on the use of systemic resources to support the transformation of teachers' work and students' learning.

Traditionally, as a system of Catholic schools, CEDP operates within a theory of action that sees some finite resources and expertise held at the centre and shared across schools to build the capacity of school leaders and teachers to bring about high-quality learning experiences for students at the local school level. During the volatile periods of 2020, principals observed leadership emerging from all aspects of their staff and high degrees of collaboration as teachers responded to rapid change. During this highly dynamic period, the Executive Director observed powerful leadership emerging at the local community level as the principals responded to their unique communities rather than trying to implement a 'one-size-fits-all' centrally managed model. This unique pandemic situation challenged the traditional structures and processes that have defined the system.

This challenge presented an ideal opportunity to reflect on our existing theory of action and the espoused strategic pillars of CEDP to determine the agility of our structures and processes in responding to changes and challenges.

Four priorities guide the work of our Catholic system:

- mission is countercultural
- learning is owned by the learner
- equity is the norm
- everyone is a leader.

Informed by this mission and these overarching strategic priorities, there are three key priorities for the System Learning Team (SLT) who support learning and teaching in schools by working with teachers in learning spaces, in partnership with school leadership teams and sometimes directly with students:

- expand a culture of innovation
- personalise learning for leaders
- champion diversity and equity.

The SLT operates within the following theory of action that connects the four actions and their intended influence or impact:

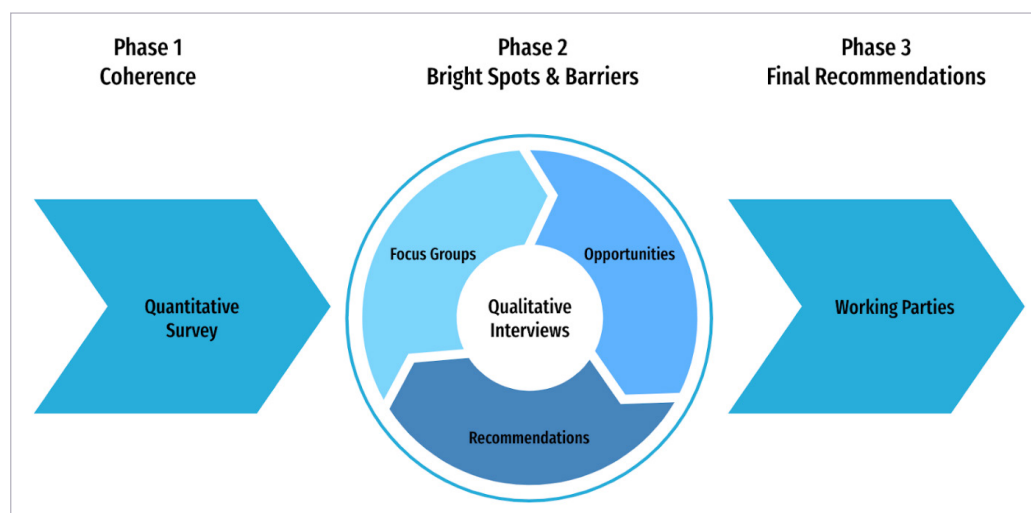
- teaching influences student learning
- teacher learning influences teaching
- school leadership influences teacher learning
- system leadership influences school leadership.

This paper documents a transparent and collaborative reflection on how the SLT supports schools to (in addressing the system intent) transform the learning of each student and enrich the professional lives of staff within our Catholic learning community.

Methodology

The approach to this work was iterative and the process has been collaborative and transparent. We designed a three-phase structure referred to as the 'learning health check' that began with a quantitative survey delivered to all teaching and non-teaching staff in schools (including leaders) as well as the SLT. This was Phase 1. The aim of the quantitative survey was to assess the coherence of our resources and services provided in meeting the needs of our schools. It is envisaged that this instrument could be used as an annual measure of coherence. Phase 2 involves a more qualitative lens in further exploring the key themes identified in Phase 1 by assembling focus groups that will address some of the areas of misalignment to identify opportunities and recommendations that may not have been previously considered. The future opportunities identified in the focus groups will be categorised according to implementation suitability and timeframe. Finally, Phase 3 will utilise working parties across school and system learning to co-design and test prototype solutions of new ways of working. Figure 1 shows the components of each phase.

Figure 1 Three phase structure for the 'learning health check'



Phase 1: Coherence

A quantitative survey was constructed to evaluate the following two areas:

- Impact – learning strategic priorities including:
 - impact on student learning (ISL)
 - culture of innovation (CI)
 - personalised learning (PL)
 - equity and diversity (ED)
- Process – learning theory of action
 - student learning (SL)
 - teaching (TH)
 - teacher learning (TL)
 - school leadership (SL)
 - system leadership (SYL)

The survey questions were designed to collect insights regarding the areas of impact and process across different roles and contexts within school-based personnel and SLT. Table 1 shows the questions that were used in the design of the qualitative survey.

The quantitative survey was administered in December 2020 and was distributed to both school-based personnel and SLT.

Table 1 Questions used to address the design of the qualitative survey

	Impact on student learning (ISL)	Culture of innovation (CI)	Personalised learning (PL)	Equity and diversity (ED)
Question stem: The learning directorate:				
Student learning (SL)	1.1 Supports me to improve the learning outcomes of each student.	2.1 Is open to new ideas	3.1 Provides choice in how I solve student learning problems.	4.1 Provides access to the resources and services that I need to improve the learning outcomes of each student.
		2.2. Values the contributions and insights of teachers to improve student learning outcomes of each student.		
Teaching (TH)	1.2 Provides support in developing teaching practices that improve the learning outcomes of each student.	2.3 Provides in situ support that enables me to take ownership over new teaching practices that improve the learning outcomes of each student.	3.2 Provides a range of in situ learning opportunities to develop teaching practice that are personalised to my needs.	4.2 Listens and understands my diverse needs.
		2.4 provides resources that enable me to take ownership over new teaching practices that improve the learning outcomes of each student.		4.3 is collaborative in sourcing appropriate support and resources to improve the learning outcomes of each student.
Teacher Learning (TL)	1.3 provides professional learning opportunities that assist me to transform the learning of each student.	2.5 provides me with new knowledge and skills that enrich my professional life.	3.3 helps identify learning and teaching needs within my school.	4.4 is responsive to school needs in the resource and service allocation to build the capacity of all teachers.
			3.4 provides support to address these needs with fair, constructive feedback on my work.	

	Impact on student learning (ISL)	Culture of innovation (CI)	Personalised learning (PL)	Equity and diversity (ED)
School Leadership (SL)	1.4 encourages school leaders to work collaboratively to lead the learning agenda within their school context to transform the learning of each student.	2.6 introduces innovative ideas into work practices that enrich the professional lives of staff.	3.5 provides personalised opportunities for leaders to transform the learning of each student.	4.5 provides autonomy in the management of the resources and services that schools access to transform the learning of each student.
System Leadership (SYL) The learning directorate:	1.5 works in partnership with schools to provide mutual support that identifies, understands and scales improvement efforts that transform the learning of each student.	2.7 champions innovation by seeking out new strategies or instruments that support schools to transform the learning of each student.	3.6 facilitates diverse professional learning opportunities that enrich the professional lives of staff.	4.6 promotes opportunities for joint decision-making in the allocation of resources and services with each school context.
	1.6 works in partnership with schools to provide an appropriate level of challenge that identifies improvement efforts that transform the learning of each student.	2.8 champions innovation by seeking out learning frameworks that support schools to transform the learning of each student.	3.7 supports diverse professional learning opportunities that enrich the professional lives of staff	4.7 promotes opportunities for divergent opinions in the allocation of resources and services with each school context.

Phase 1 response rates

Figure 2 shows the survey response rate of the total 971 school-based personnel responses. And Figure 3 shows the survey response rate of the total 70 system-based personnel responses. Descriptive statistics were calculated to identify any significant differences between the identified subgroups. Some of which included school type (primary and secondary), school population, leadership role (senior and other leader) and system team roles. Within the survey construction, qualitative responses were also collected and coded using Nvivo to identify possible themes for further investigation in Phase 2. In March 2021, a summary of findings was presented to system leaders and they were given the opportunity to engage their school-based personnel in an opportunity to ask clarifying and probing questions related to the findings. This process again was an opportunity to continually build relational trust within the system and an opportunity to co-construct next steps.

Figure 2 Survey response rate for school-based personnel responses

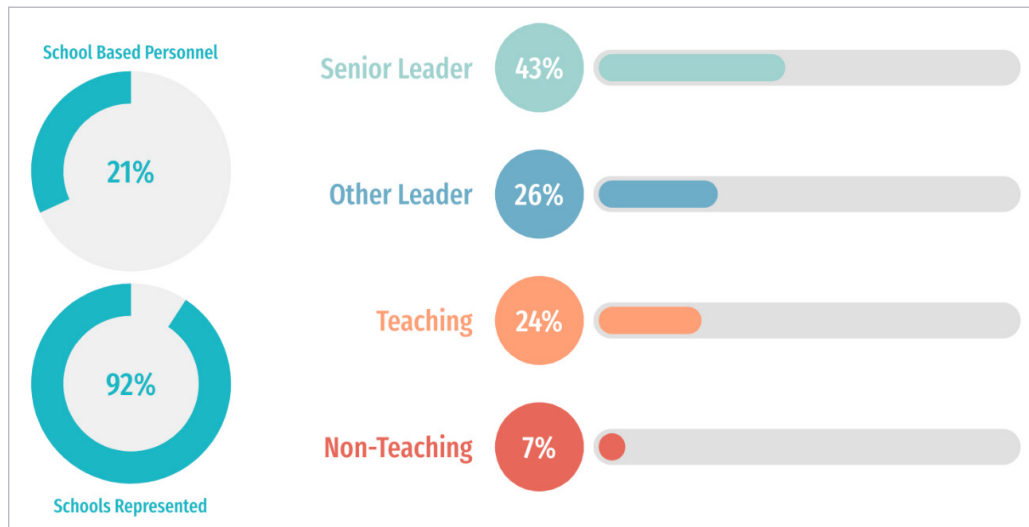
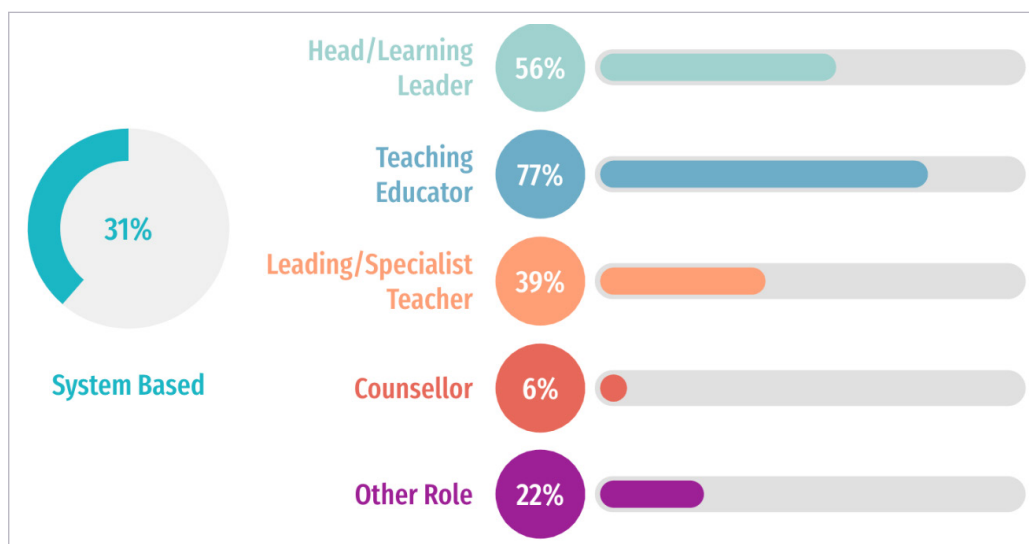


Figure 3 Survey response rate for SLT responses



Priority areas

From the survey in Phase 1, we identified three priority areas that merited further investigation or attention due to the lower ratings or the discrepancies between school-based personnel and SLT responses.

- Priority 1 Alignment and trust between SLT and schools to enable leadership in all.
- Priority 2 Importance of structures and processes to support diversity and equity.
- Priority 3 Ensuring structures and processes foster innovation and transformation.

This paper focuses on Priority 1.

Priority 1 Alignment and trust between SLT and schools to enable leadership in all

The quantitative data identified a pattern around the misalignment of perceptions between SLT and school-based personnel. SLT staff reported higher perceptions of their effect than school-based personnel. The qualitative comments flagged some concerns around the collaborations between the system office and schools. The responses suggest there may be weak relational trust between the system office and schools in some instances.

Some qualitative responses suggested some respondents did not share a belief in the Catholic systemic principle of making better use of finite resources by sharing expertise across schools. However, the feedback also suggested that when learning or other services are personalised or tailored to the context, respondents were most positive. It was apparent that when respondents felt their context was deeply understood by system office-based staff they felt their interactions were more positive.

This customised service is linked to respondents' desire to have genuine agency in all that they do. Respondents suggested that 'one-size-fits-all' approaches and policies or programs that eroded schools' capacity to make decisions based on their contexts left them feeling frustrated. Some respondents reported feeling constrained by the perception that system office personnel sometimes imposed a single way of doing things on schools without listening or understanding the context. There was a perception that the system office staff had 'an agenda' for their work that was not always in keeping with what the school believed was their priority.

We sought to explore how to build greater coherence and overall collective efficacy (Donohoo et al., 2018) as a learning system to activate all members of the community to transform the learning of each student and enrich the professional lives of staff through a series of focus groups with teachers, leaders and office-based staff.

Phase 2: Bright spots and barriers

The key insights from the quantitative data and the coding of the qualitative responses were grouped to focus on three priority areas. These were further explored through a series of targeted focus groups that invited participants to imagine possibilities for the future and ultimately engage colleagues in a co-design and testing of prototype solutions. The facilitation of the focus group meetings utilised a 'step in, step out and step back' protocol to enable participants the opportunity to identify bright spots in the way we currently work that make a difference in their role or context. But also, to explore the barriers or areas of possible misalignment. This protocol required participants to analyse the impact locally and broadly across the system to schools to ideate possible prototype solutions that could be deepened in Phase 3. Phase 3 is currently being undertaken at the time of writing this paper..

Conclusions

While this remains a work in progress at the time of submission of this paper, some key themes have emerged through the focus group ideation process that will inform the future processes and structures of our system.

1. The constant transparent process of building trust with stakeholders through co-construction and collaborative unpacking is essential. Often at a system level, we expedite processes to get to outcomes.
2. System structures established to support improvement are not the same structures that support innovation and transformation.
3. A linear theory of action suggests knowledge, expertise and power is held by 'authority figures', which may contribute to erosion of empowerment, creativity and learning of teachers.
4. System structures must enable ideas and expertise to emerge from any part of the organisation to enable anyone to be a leader.
5. An implementation stance erodes teacher agency and learning capacity.
6. The complexity of needs in classrooms demand new ways of working and new solutions.
7. Teacher learning must be central to a teacher's day, not an add-on.
8. Horizontal connections between schools enable teachers to build system knowledge and contribute new understandings to the system discourse.

Following this idea generation phase, we will move to identifying the best possible solutions. Different stakeholder groups will be invited to engage with these ideas and participate in the discernment process. Through this process, we will seek to identify potential 'prototypes' that can be trialled and evaluated to inform our processes and structures in our post-pandemic future.

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